

Lets use this week's Bible study to get a better picture of who Paul was. He starts to tell us a little bit about himself and his background before he starts to instruct the Galatians in other matters. I think it's important to get a good handle on the person of Paul before taking on these instructions in our study.

*This Week's Scripture*

"For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to re-

member the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” (Galatians 1:13-2:10)

### *Paul's Background*

As Paul says in this passage, he was well learned in the ways of Torah and the “traditions of his Fathers.” He calls himself a “Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Torah, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the messianic community; as to righteousness, under the Law, blameless.”<sup>1</sup>

He says that he was “born in Tarsus” but trained “at the feet of Gamaliel”<sup>2</sup> who lived in Jerusalem. Studying with such a prominent teacher was not only a great privilege but was also probably very expensive. Whether his family moved to Jerusalem or whether Paul lived with family members in Jerusalem isn’t mentioned. His studies would have started with the Aleph-Bet, then Torah and eventually the sea of Oral Torah which was not even written down in his time but would have been taught to him by a very “*Chakam*” or “*wise one*.” We would call this a “Sage.” For Paul, we know that this Sage was none other than Gamaliel.

Without going in to great detail, Gamaliel was one of the most prominent teachers in the entire history of Judaism. He was even the leader of The Great Assembly at one point in his life. He was also known for relaxing certain rules to help the disadvantaged people. “For example” says Tim Hegg, “because the times were unfavorable toward the Jews, and many men lost their lives to Roman swords, the number of widows in the Jewish community grew rapidly. Gamaliel ruled that a valid divorce for a woman whose husband was presumed lost in battle could be based on testimony of only one witness rather than the traditional two witnesses. By this change, the ‘red tape’ was diminished for a widow to remarry and come under the protection of a new husband.”<sup>3</sup>

Gamaliel was also known for writing “letters” or “Epistles” to the Jewish communities in Judea as well as the diaspora. In these epistles he would often include information about things like tithing and leap years. Paul, no doubt, in imitating his teacher, used this style of communicating his thoughts with the messianic Jewish gatherings abroad.

Also this prominent teacher is cited in the book of Acts as being tolerant and possibly even sympathetic to the members of The Way. When Peter and the other Apostles were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the people who arrested them wanted to see them punished for teaching in the name of Yeshua—something which they were strictly warned against doing,<sup>4</sup> Gamaliel, the leader of the Sanhedrin at the time says this:

<sup>1</sup> Philippians 3:5,6

<sup>2</sup> Acts 22:3

<sup>3</sup> *The Letter Writer 2nd Edition* - Tim Hegg - © 2008 TorahResource - Page 38

<sup>4</sup> Acts 5:28

“Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” (Acts 5:38-39)

Paul’s teacher was also very keen on teaching all of his students Greek as well as Greek philosophy. He did this because of the massive presence of Greek, western culture intermixing with that of the Hebrews.<sup>5</sup>

This also gives an explanation as to why in Acts 17 when Paul is in Athens he was able to speak with with Greek philosophers. He is brought before Areopagus because he was previously talking about things that confused the Greeks and there he give reason for his belief. In verse 28 he directly quotes Epimenides of Crete, a Greek philosopher! And to give his argument ground with the Greeks he was talking to, he quotes known Greek poets right after that.

Hegg says, “Here, then, is a remarkable possibility: God, through His all wise providence, has Paul study at the feet of Gamaliel, not only one of the finest teachers in the matters of Torah and Hebrew studies, but also learned in Greek and Greek philosophy and thus able to prepare Paul for what neither of them could have imagined—God’s plan to make Paul an apostle for Yeshua to the Gentiles.”<sup>6</sup>

#### *The Damascus Road Encounter*

Obviously, along with Greek philosophy and Torah study came the “traditions of the fathers.” These traditions would become known as the Oral Torah. As we already know Oral Torah had become so interwoven with the written Torah that in many cases Oral Torah and Written Torah had become indistinguishable from one another. It was commonly taught in Paul’s day that those who taught contrary to these traditions would have no place in the world-to-come. Since Yeshua was known to have spoken against many of these traditions,<sup>7</sup> He and His followers were naturally viewed by Paul and his contemporaries as heretics worthy of death or at very least, punishment. Also, the very thought of idolatrous gentiles being accepted within the synagogue community without undergoing the traditional man-made ritual of becoming a proselyte would have been repulsive to Paul and any of the authorities in Paul’s day.

Luke makes it very clear in the book of Acts why Paul was heading to Damascus. He had obtained letters of permission to enter the synagogues to find members of The Way and arrest them for future prosecution in Jerusalem. Little did he know, everything that he thought about the Gentiles, the followers of The Way, and Yeshua of Nazareth was about to be turned on it’s head.

“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell

<sup>5</sup> b. *Sotah* 49b

<sup>6</sup> *The Letter Writer 2nd Edition* - Tim Hegg - © 2008 TorahResource - Page 41

<sup>7</sup> Mark 7:6-13, Matthew 12:1-8

to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Sha'ul, Sha'ul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Sha'ul asked.

"I am Yeshua, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Sha'ul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Sha'ul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything." (Acts 9:3-9)

"We can begin to envision what must have run through Paul's mind as he was struck blind by the *Shechinah* and humbly led to Damascus to await the coming of Ananias. Out of his zeal to serve HaShem he had come face to face with the One he had despised, the One he was sure had led Israel astray. Against all manner of thinking, he had come to know and believe that Yeshua was the true Messiah, and that His message, which struck the heart of arrogance with penetrating blows, was not contrary to the Torah.

Suddenly the framework of Paul's zealous persecutions began to collapse all around him. How could he have been so wrong? ... How Paul's thoughts must have raced during those intervening days as he sat in blindness, forced into a contemplative inactivity! He must have realized that his zeal, along with some of his interpretations of the Torah, were ill-founded and contrary to the God he so wished to please.

Surely, through this encounter with the Almighty, Paul could never be the same. If he understood nothing else from this experience, he was sure of this: Yeshua was the true Messiah. The Torah and the Prophets would need to be understood in light of Yeshua's teachings. Such a "re-reading" would change forever the course of his life and ministry."<sup>8</sup>

#### *Paul Accepted By The Apostles*

Some fourteen years after Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus he came to Jerusalem to see the Apostles and "set before them the Gospel which he had been preaching" in order to make sure that what had been preaching was in fact the same message that they themselves were preaching. In response, the Apostles "had nothing to add." On the contrary, they acknowledged that just as Peter was chosen to bring the Good News of the Messiah to the Jews he was the one chosen to bring the Good News of salvation to the Gentiles.

Right then and there the James, Cephas, and John (the "pillars of the influential as Paul referred to them") gave the "right hand of fellowship" to Barnabas and Paul that they should go to the Gentiles while they themselves would go to the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *The Letter Writer 2nd Edition - Tim Hegg - © 2008 TorahResource - Pages 88-89*

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 2:6-10